

A CONDUCTOR'S HISTORICAL AND CONTEXTUAL INTRODUCTION TO
BRAHMS'S OP.17, *FOUR SONGS FOR WOMEN'S CHORUS, TWO HORNS, AND*
HARP

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Though the choral repertoire of Johannes Brahms is a well-traversed subject among Brahms scholars and choral conductors (especially as far as *Ein Deutsches Requiem* is concerned), his Op. 17 somehow remains tucked away in the shadows by the academic world, only to be pulled out briefly for a reminder of its beauty, then quickly put aside. Conductors have frequently featured this four-movement work for women's chorus, horns, and harp on their programs, as it is aesthetically breathtaking and mesmerizing for most audience members and singers alike. Yet there is a surprising dearth of scholarly background to support or properly analyze the work, its purpose, or its place in history.

Among the reasons for this void in research is the lack of available first-hand sources that discuss the performance or creation of the specific work. However, conclusions can be drawn about Op. 17 by gathering and examining sources of concurrent works and reports of Brahms and his *Hamburger Frauenchor* at the time of its composition and performance. Focusing on the influences and studies in Johannes Brahms's early compositional life provides insight into what value he placed on the work and what he hoped to achieve through it. The experiences of the group of women for whom Brahms composed the piece are fascinating accounts in themselves, but more importantly, they can reveal the role Op. 17 played in their story.

Sophie Drinker's research compiled in her project, *Brahms and His Women's Chorus*, presents hope for some fulfillment on the issues of Brahms's Op. 17. This

collection of primary sources provides first-hand observations that can paint a framework of the context surrounding Brahms's work. Understanding Brahms's early compositional life, and his involvement with the *Hamburger Frauenchor*, and highlighting the contextual choices he made for his opus are valuable background for a choral conductor preparing an ensemble for the performance of Brahms's Op. 17.

Even Brahms's contemporaries struggled with knowing how to present this work to their amateur women's choruses. In a letter to Brahms, composer Jacob Otto Grimm mentioned—for whatever reason—how he struggled with understanding the set of songs.¹ For twenty-first century connoisseurs, it is important to place the work in the framework of choral compositions Brahms used to maintain “the habit of experimenting with new technical aspects of composition.”² Ever the dedicated and learned musician, Brahms throughout his life surrounded himself with the studying and collecting of compositions of masters—Germans and not—that came before him. It was during his early compositional years that were spent mostly in Detmold, Hamburg, and Vienna (up through the early 1860s) that Brahms experienced the biggest growth in his personal library as he dedicated more of his time to score analysis.³ The interest in music history was a relatively new field in Brahms's time,⁴ but one he appreciated and embraced. Brahms was continually fascinated with Renaissance and Baroque composers, especially those exceptional in polyphonic writing. Palestrina, Schutz, and Johann Sebastian Bach

1. Sophie Drinker, *Brahms and His Women's Choruses* (Marion, PA: Author under the auspices of Musurpia Publishers, A.G. Hess, 1952), 116.

2. Siegfried Kross, “The Choral Music of Johannes Brahms,” *American Choral Review* 25/4 (October 1983): 7.

3. Virginia Hancock, *Brahms Choral Compositions and His Library of Choral Music* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), 113.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

were a few of the composers with whose works Brahms spent time analyzing compositional techniques. As his career as a conductor blossomed throughout his life, his devotion to older music guided his choices for performances as well, frequently performing Bach, Byrd, Handel, Hassler, Palestrina and others.⁵

Brahms interest in and easy access to early music was aided by Robert Schumann's own interest and personal library. Schumann's curiosity in polyphony propagated a library rich in his predecessors' music. This collection was taken advantage of by Brahms during his stint living with the Schumann's while Robert was hospitalized and Clara was on tour.⁶ He frequented others' libraries while he built his own with scores (i.e., Bach's *Werke*) that would be his textbooks as he investigated compositional methods.

Virginia Hancock points out that, in his personal music library, Brahms carried mostly German vocal scores, though he also owned some Italian and Latin sources as well.⁷ Perhaps this is an indication of his nineteenth-century dedication to promoting German nationalism and pride, but it does reveal his comfort with working primarily with his native tongue. In his own vocal writing, he overwhelmingly preferred setting German text to music, favoring texts translated into German rather than in their original languages. His library also showed an interest in poetry and literature.⁸

5. In Virginia Hancock's *Brahms Choral Compositions and His Library of Choral Music*, she provides a list of early vocal music repertoire conducted by Brahms, see Appendix 1.

6. Hancock, 2.

7. Ibid., 108.

8. Karl Geiringer, *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies*, ed. George S. Bozarth (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 31.

Brahms's library sourced him with study materials to build and experiment in compositional skills, especially in counterpoint study. His self-education and experimentation was the source for much of the correspondence between Brahms and his friend and fellow musician, Joseph Joachim.⁹ Together, they sought to study and encourage one another in counterpoint technique.

In those early, formative years of the late 1850s, choral music particularly became an outlet for Brahms to utilize acquired compositional skills. As the first thoughts of forming a women's chorus for himself in Hamburg were coming to fruition (Spring of 1859), he was avidly involved in the a cappella motets of Palestrina, and tried his own experimental hand at sixteenth-century counterpoint in the motets *O Bone Jesu* and *Adoramus* (Op. 37 nos. 1, 2). However, Brahms rarely—except in correspondence—indicated specific connections between his studies and his compositions.¹⁰

His studies also included folk music in polyphonic Renaissance vocal works.¹¹ Much of his time was dedicated to the arrangement of German folk tunes as choral settings or as solos with piano accompaniment. His enthusiasm for folk music is characteristic of Brahms's vocal works, having arranged a total of 144 German folk lieder in his life and many sets of choral works (i.e., *15 Volks-Kinderlieder*, *28 Deutsche Volkslieder*, etc.), and the tradition of arranging either direct folk songs or setting folk-

9. See more about this correspondence in David Broadbeck, "Brahms—Joachim Counterpoint Exchange; or, Robert, Clara, and 'the Best Harmony Between Jos. And Joh,'" in *Brahms Studies*, Vol.1, ed. David Broadbeck (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 30-80.

10. Drinker, 19.

11. Hancock, 113.

like, romantic poetry is a long-standing one (continuing up to his latest years with the 49 *Deutsche Volkslieder* in 1894).

In Hamburg, Friedchen Wagner—Brahms’s piano student with whom he enjoyed sharing music, studying, performing, and discussion—asked Brahms to arrange folk tunes for her and her two sisters, Thesnelde and Olga, to sing together. Brahms complied willingly. Eventually, Friedchen invited other women to join their small group of amateur singers. In Friedchen’s memoirs: “After a short time, several young ladies came to take part in the singing and thus gradually a women’s chorus was formed in my parents’ home.”¹² The proactive gesture of Friedchen eventually sparked the notion that formed the *Frauenchor*.

To form a choral society, even in a private home, in the late years of the nineteenth century was not abnormal. The promotion of amateur musicians during the time of advancement in instrument-making, exploration of chamber-music genres such as *Lieder*, and the continued rise of an educated middle class developed a need for opportunities to join musicians together to express both their learned aesthetic culture and public ideologies. These established groups typically included citizens of the upper, middle-class society. They had the time and money to invest in leisure and the arts, having accrued the knowledge of fine arts and desired to partake in their own ways.

Germany at this time boasted many such groups. In examining the German spirit, Daniel Beller-McKenna claims: “Choral works, especially larger pieces with orchestra,

12. Drinker, 12.

produced a community-building effect in nineteenth-century Germany.”¹³ Drinker goes so far as to claim: “With their informal music and public concerts, they made Germany the Mecca of musicians the world over.”¹⁴ Concurrent to the *Hamburger Frauenchor*, associations thrived such as the *Hamburg Akademie* directed by Karl Grädener, and the Göttingen choruses, one—the *Cäcilia Verein*—which was conducted by the popular Julius Otto Grimm, a colleague and influence on Brahms. In 1858, Grimm invited Brahms to work with his women’s chorus in Göttingen, an appointment that excited him to compose for and experiment with women’s voices.

His excitement was increased further while Brahms was serving as an organist at a wedding at St. Michael’s Church in Hamburg where Grädener’s women’s choir was also performing. The sound of the women’s voices in the sacred space was enticing. He had already composed an *Ave Maria*, but lacked a performing group in Hamburg that would take up the responsibility of working with him. It was at this time that he recruited the help of Friedchen Wagner, who was friends with some of the ladies in Grädener’s *Hamburg Akademie*, to gather volunteers to take on such responsibilities.¹⁵ Many of the ladies already knew of Brahms’s abilities and were eager participants. Brahms benefitted from an eager ensemble at his fingertips that he could use to rehearse, alter, and perform his own compositional, choral experiments.

Twenty-eight women showed up the first Monday of rehearsal in June of 1859 to rehearse Brahms’s *Ave Maria*, *O bone Jesu*, *Adoramus*, and two of the eventual six

13. Daniel Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

14. Drinker, 10.

15. See Drinker’s account of the happenings leading to the formation of the group in her retelling of diaries, (Drinker, 19-20).

Marienlieder. By August 29 of the same year, there were at least forty women involved. As the group grew, there developed three different factions of the *Frauenchor*.¹⁶ The regular choir averaged around forty ladies. From that group, came a smaller group of ladies that continued to sing the folksongs that Brahms arranged for Friedchen Wagner and her contingent. Later on, there was also a group of four exceptional singers whose objective was to perform soloistic pieces Brahms created for them.

The choir rehearsed approximately two hours every Monday. Rehearsals commenced at nine in the morning, typically at Friedchen's house. According to the writings of some of the original *Frauenchor* singers, the rehearsals were tedious and productive. After a time of rigorous rehearsing, the ladies were allowed an intermission. The expectation was that rehearsals would last to around eleven o'clock, but Brahms was a thorough rehearsalist and the mornings often went longer than expected. In Franziska Meier's August 15th journal, she comments: "We practiced very hard until long past 11."¹⁷ These rehearsals often ended or were extended with mini-concerts by Brahms as he exchanged roles from conductor to performer and displayed his esteemed piano skills.

Each of the singers held the responsibility to copy out their own voice part from Brahms's manuscripts into their own notebook. The collection of these part-books from several of the *Frauenchor* members now make up the *Stimmenheft* from which much information can be gleaned about his time in Hamburg. Rehearsal time often included checking these parts when there were discrepancies. At the beginning of rehearsals,

16. Drinker, 43.

17. Drinker, 27.

Brahms would address any difficulties or changes in his writing before singing commenced.¹⁸

As a composer, his objective with the group was both experimenting with his compositions, and also to experiment with women's voices. He paid attention to sitting arrangements and voice parts, as well as the ability of the women in his group, commenting frequently on the music he wrote specifically for them. Monday rehearsals were not exclusively dedicated to Brahms's compositions.¹⁹ Works by Schumann, Grädener, and Schubert were also scheduled for rehearsals and performances.

The ladies rehearsed all summer, every Monday for their first, rather informal performance on September 26th at St. Peter's Church. At 10:30 that morning, from the church choir loft, the *Frauenchor*, dressed in black, sang through Grädener's wedding motet (Psalm 127), four *Marienlieder* (op. 22, nos. 1, 2, 4, 5), Schubert's Psalm 23 (op. 132), Brahms's Psalm 13 (op. 27), his Palestrina-inspired *O Bone Jesu* and *Adoramus* (op. 37, no. 1, 2), and his *Ave Maria* (op. 12).²⁰ On December 2, 1859, Brahms returned to Hamburg from Detmold to conduct another performance at Grädener's Academy, before leaving again.

In the winter of 1859-60, Brahms began his composition of Op. 17. The set of four songs for SSA women, two horns, and a harp is unusual in the long list of Brahms's women's chorus repertoire, yet its uniqueness also qualifies its value as a programmed work. Clara Schumann, upon hearing the set for the first time in a joint concert with the

18. Ibid., 29.

19. For other compositions by Brahms during his early years see Hancock, 104.

20. For Clara Schumann's thoughts on these works see Drinker, 44-45.

Frauenchor in January of 1861, was moved to refer to them as “pearls.”²¹ The four pieces allure and immediately please the senses with mournful text and poignant instrumentation.²² All four pieces are on the subject of lament, yet they do not share a common poet or common cultural origin. Though not folksongs like Brahms typically uses, they are romantic poetry on the topic of death that—with the addition of horns, in particular—allude to folk tradition.

The first song is a short, two-strophe poem by Friedrich Ruperti. In “Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang”²³ (no. 1), the libretto discusses the great sound of the harp, tears, and lost love in the grave. This opening piece paints a somber timbre that both unifies the harp to this work, and announces the sober, literary theme. Brahms uses key vivid words and phrases such as “Lieb und Sehnsucht schwellen” (love and longing swell), “dringt” (penetrates), “o schlage Herz mit Beben!” (O heart pound with trembling!), and “Grab” (grave).

Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang
Den Lieb' und Sehnsucht schwellen,
Er dringt zum Herzen tief und bang
Und läßt das Auge quellen.

The full sound of harps rings out,
Swelling one with love and yearning;
It pierces one to the heart, deeply and
anxiously,
And leaves the eyes streaming.

O rinnet, Tränen, nur herab,
O schlage Herz, mit Beben!
Es sanken Lieb' und Glück ins Grab,
Verloren ist mein Leben!

O run, my tears, stream down;
O pound, my heart and quiver!
Love and Happiness are buried in the
grave; Lost is my life!
(trans. *Emily Ezust*)

21. Drinker, 68.

22. In Hans Michael Beuerle's dissertation, he discusses Brahms's goal to be practical and to be heard with instant gratification see Hans Michael Beuerle, “Untersuchungen zum historischen Stellenwert der A-cappella-Kompositionen von Johannes Brahms,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Joahann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 1975), 101.

23. Karl Grädener also set this text to music (Op. 23, no. 6).

The second piece comes from England's William Shakespeare, entitled "Lied von Shakespeare" (no. 2). Here, Brahms set a German translation (by A.W. von Schlegel) of the verses from Act 2, scene 4 of *Twelfth Night*.²⁴ Again, Brahms's sets a binary, strophic poem in which a male character (a clown in the play) directly address and desires death. The text is spoken from a man's point of view, which makes it an odd choice to be set for a female chorus.

Komm herbei, komm herbei, Tod,
Und versenk' in Cypressen den Leib;
Lass mich frei, lass mich frei, Not,
Mich erschlägt ein holdseliges Weib.
Mit Rosmarin mein Leichenhemd,
O bestellt es!
Ob Lieb' ans Herz mir tödlich kommt,
Treu' hält es.

Come away, come away, death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid;
Fly away, fly away, breath;
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O prepare it!
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it.

Keine Blum, keine Blum süß,
Sei gestreut auf den schwärzlichen Sarg;
Keine Seel', keine Seel' grüß
mein Gebein, wo die Erde es verbarg.
Um Ach und Weh zu wenden ab', bergt
alleine
mich, wo kein Treuer wall' ans Grab und
weine.
(trans. August Wilhelm Schlegel)

Not a flower, not a flower sweet,
On my black coffin let there be strown;
Not a friend, not a friend greet
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be
thrown:
A thousand, thousand sighs to save,
Lay me, O where
Sad true lover never find my grave,
To weep there!

"Der Gärtner" (no. 3) is a poem by the popular, romantic German poet and novelist, Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff.²⁵ The poem, also from a man's perspective, is full of descriptive images that the gardener associates with his love, but ultimately ends

24. See Hancock's discussion on his lack of confidence in foreign languages in *Brahms's Choral Compositions and His Early Music*, 108.

25. Sophie Drinker gives a listing of poets in her Appendix C, showing Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff as a poet Brahms utilized often (op. 17, no. 3; op. 44, no. 2; op. 113; nos. 7 and 8). "Der Gärtner" comes from his romantic novella *Aus Dem Leben eines Taugenichts*, also found in his *Gedichte*.

with him fatefully digging his own grave. There is a generous quantity of fast words set to short rhythms in the four strophes of this poem.

Wohin ich geh' und schaue,
In Feld und Wald und Tal,
Vom Berg hinab in die Aue;
Viel schöne, hohe Fraue,
Grüß ich dich tausendmal.

Wherever I go and look,
in field and forest and plain,
down the hill to the mead;
most beautiful noble lady,
I greet you a thousand times.

In meinem Garten find' ich
Viel' Blumen schön und fein,
Viel' Kränze wohl draus wind' ich
Und tausend Gedanken bind' ich
Und Grüße mit darein.

In my garden I find
many flowers, pretty and nice,
many garlands I bind from them
and a thousand thoughts
and greetings I weave into them.

Ihr darf ich keinen reichen,
Sie ist zu hoch und schön,
Die müssen alle verbleichen,
Die Liebe nur ohnegleichen
Bleibt ewig im Herzen stehn.

Her I must not give one,
she is too noble and fair;
they all have to fade,
only unequalled love
stays in the heart forever.

Ich schein' wohl froher Dinge
Und schaffe auf und ab,
Und, ob das Herz zerspringe,
Ich grabe fort und singe,
Und grab mir bald mein Grab.

I seem to be of good cheer
and work to and fro,
and, though my heart bursts,
I dig on and sing,
and soon I dig my grave.
(trans. *Jakob Kellner*)

The opus's fourth piece is the most varied, the longest, and the most highly praised. It rightfully stands out from its previous three numbers as it was composed slightly after them. Grimm failed to be impressed by the other three numbers, but expressed that "the Fingal piece is glorious."²⁶ By "Fingal," Grimm was referring to a song cycle written by an ancient Gaelic hero, Ossian. James MacPherson was one of the first to translate many of the verses into English. Brahms used a German translation (by an unknown author) of MacPherson's as the text of his later number. This piece was not

26. Drinker, 51.

performed at the premier of the work in April of 1860, but was completed and added later.

The text of “Gesang aus Fingal” (no. 4) is the only non-strophic piece in the set, and is the only lament written to women. It is a lament for the “Mädchen von Inistore” to mourn the death of her lover, Trenar. It is a call for her to “Wein!” (Weep!): a common role of women in ancient times. Inevitable fate of mortals is exhibited in its rhythmic patterns that dominate the entire, more contrapuntal piece.²⁷ Though not set strophically, the text is repetitive and full of exclamation. It also displays a different color because of the use of foreign terms (i.e., “Inistore,” “Cuthullins,” “Trenar”).

Wein' an den Felsen, der brausenden
Winde
weine, o Mädchen von Inistore!
Beug' über die Wogen dein schönes Haupt,
lieblicher du als der Geist der Berge,
wenn er um Mittag in einem Sonnenstrahl
über das Schweigen von Morven fährt.

Er ist gefallen, dein Jüngling liegt
darnieder,
bleich sank er unter Cuthullins Schwert.
Nimmer wird Mut deinen Liebling mehr
reizen,
das Blut von Königen zu vergießen.

Trenar, der liebliche Trenar starb
O Mädchen von Inistore!
Seine grauen Hunde heulen daheim,
sie sehn seinen Geist vorüberziehn.
Sein Bogen hängt ungespannt in der Halle,
nichts regt sich auf der Haide der Rehe.

Weep on the rocks of roaring winds,
O maid of Inistore!
Bend thy fair head over the waves,
thou lovelier than the ghost of the hills; w
hen it moves in a sun-beam, at noon,
over the silence of Morven!

He is fallen, thy youth is low!
pale beneath the sword of Cuthullin!
No more shall valour raise thy love
to match the blood of kings.

Trenar, graceful Trenar died,
O maid of Inistore!
His grey dogs are howling at home!
they see his passing ghost.
His bow is in the hall unstrung.
No sound is in the hall of his hinds!
(trans. *James MacPherson*)

27. Kross, 11.

The choice of instrumentation in this set is particularly noteworthy. In no other composition does Brahms choose to use a harp and two horns, joined with a women's chorus. Clara Schumann inquired after his choice of instruments in a letter she wrote him on March 3rd, 1860. She imagined the sound would be “most uncommon,” but “full of feeling” and “spell binding.”²⁸

In the few letters and journal entries of the first people to encounter this set, it is in fact often referred to as the *gesänge* for horns and harp or the *Harfenlieder*. It is not the text, the style, or the occasion, but the instrumentation that unifies the four different songs as a set. Perhaps the experimentation or inquiry for Brahms with this work was the timbre of the instruments rather than—or in addition to—the writing for women's voices. As important characters in the work, the harp and horns hearken to a far-away, fictitious place. Though these are not folksongs, the harp paints a romantic setting for the love laments and creates a folk-like ambiance. Another instance of Brahms using harp in his choral works is his Requiem where weeping and tears are, again, the subject matter of the piece. In both works, he chooses the harp to enhance expressivity of mourning.²⁹

The first of the set, “Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang,” makes the case right away that the horns and harp are the true starts of the work. The opening call of the horn in measure 1 (Example 1) beckons the audience to gather and bask in the beauty of the expressive opening prelude for the horn and harp. When the three-part women's voices enter finally in measure 10, they play a secondary role to the featured instruments.

28. Drinker, 51. She suspected that there might have been an attractive harpist in his *Frauenchor* who might have inspired this unusual choice.

29. Norman Del Mar, *Conducting Brahms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 197.

Ruperti's opening text that celebrates the harp further draws the audience to the mesmerizing and penetrating character of the harp. In this first piece, it is the music, rather than the text that serves the more significant role.

Example 1: "Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang," mm. 1-4.

The musical score for Example 1 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Horn in tief C, marked *p espress.* The bottom staff is for the Harfe, marked *Adagio, con molt' espressione* and *p*. The Harfe part features a crescendo marked *cresc.*

Brahms's uses hymn-like, block chords in the harp accompaniment for the Shakespeare piece. Here the two horns assume a more prominent role by using "horn fifths" and recalling the instrument's connection to hunting and to a sense of folklore.³⁰ The brightness of the horn's timbre, in this set, produces a sweeter perspective on the call to death.

Example 2: "Lied von Shakespeare," mm. 1-7.

The musical score for Example 2 consists of two staves. The top staff is for 2 Hörner in Es, marked *p dolce*. The bottom staff is for the Harfe, marked *Andante* and *p dolce*. The Harfe part features a piano marked *p*.

The third number resumes rapid, arpeggiated harp figures that match the wistful lyrics. This time, the harp serves as accompanist as the women sing out a copious quantity of

30. Commonly a 6-5-3 progression, see Beller-McKenna, *German Spirit*, 13.

German words. The horns accentuate and swell with the female voices, but never overcome them.

The opening eight measures of “Gesang aus Fingal” is a prelude performed by both horns in characteristic, hunting-horn fifths. The SSA chorus joins the horns homorhythmically for another eight measures before the harp takes over from the horns with block chords (Example 3). There is a constant interplay between the two instrument groups throughout the final piece, sometimes featuring one or the other, or both together. Approximately every eight measures, the figuration in the accompaniment changes—altering the number and arrangement of harp eighth notes.

At measures 49-56, the harp and the horns play an interlude without the women before another change in the next phrase’s eight-note figuration accompaniment and the re-entrance of the voices. Another four-measure interlude (mm. 65-68) occurs just before the only a cappella and the only four-part (SSAA) writing in the entire work. At this contrasting section, the four phrases become nine measures long. The horns alone rejoin the voices for the second and fourth phrases of the a cappella section. When the harp joins (m. 106), it enters with staccato triplets before returning to the opening block-chord figurations.

At m. 131, the opening theme and horn accompaniment return (without the harp or soprano voices), this time the horn taking what was the alto line beginning on G, and the alto line taking what was the soprano theme starting on Eb. The last measure of the theme is interrupted (m. 139) by the harp arpeggiations that continue through to the end of the work (Example 4). This is the first time Brahms uses these fast arpeggiations at all

in no. 4. Here in this final piece, he chooses to display the many virtuosic abilities of the harp, and ends with a full array of harp grandeur.³¹

Example 3: “Gesang aus Fingal,” mm. 9-16.

The musical score for "Gesang aus Fingal" (measures 9-16) is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 9-12, and the second system contains measures 13-16. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in the upper staves, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. The lyrics are in German. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *p*, and *p dolce*.

System 1 (Measures 9-12):

Vocal line: *pp* Wein' an den Fel-sen der brau-sen-den Win-de, *p dolce* wei-ne, o Mäd-chen von I-ni-store! Beug

Piano accompaniment: *pp*

System 2 (Measures 13-16):

Vocal line: ü-ber die Wo-gendein schö-nen Haupt, *p* lieb-li-cher du als der Geist der Ber-ge,

Piano accompaniment: *p*

31. Though Brahms featured the rare and elegant harp as his accompanying agent, there are copies of early piano arrangements to use for accompaniment.

Example 4: “Gesang aus Fingal,” mm. 137-139



Brahms's op. 17 was first performed in a private performance at Grädener's Academy on May 2, 1860, though only the first three songs were performed since the fourth was not yet ready for performance.³² With Brahms's urging, Clara Schumann finally visited Hamburg a few days later (May 6) and heard the *Harfenlieder* for the first time in an informal gathering for Brahms's birthday.³³ The following year, Clara invited the *Frauenchor* to join her in concert on January 15, 1861. The complete set was performed, however the first three numbers were given as a set, followed by three piano selections—performed by Clara, Brahms, and Joachim—then another set by the women concluded by the Fingal piece. The concert was repeated the following day in Altona.

Little else is known about the opus's history, other than its popularity in the repertoire of women's choruses. Brahms continued to evolve into a prolific composer of popular choral works, continuing his experimentation as he developed his own style and mark in the choral repertoire. His beginnings as a self-motivated student encouraged an inquisitive composer, eager to try new techniques on his enthusiastic instruments—the *Hamburger Frauenchor*. Perhaps it was curiosity with the rich timbres associated with

32. Drinker, 57.

33. Ibid., 58.

women's voices, in addition to the nostalgic quality of the harp and the horns, that Brahms designed his opus. The context of lamenting text further enhanced the mystical quality of the overall timbre of the work.

It is the conductor's role to bring meaning and life to this obscure piece. Choirs will benefit from knowing that Brahms had a specific group at a specific time in mind when he created new sound. Women's faces and skills were fixed in his mind and eye as he chose his instruments, texts, and arrangements.³⁴ The women privileged to perform this work for the first time were hard-working, amateur musicians who sang for the joy of coming together as a community and out of their faith in Brahms's abilities. It speaks to the genius and sensitivity of the composer, when even in his experimenting and even without a nobler purpose, he created works that intrigue, that entertain, that touch audiences.

34. Brahms often referred to the ladies of the *Frauenchor* as "my" girls. See letters to Clara in Styra Arvin's collection: *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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